

# The Early Use of Creeds

Has Christianity Always Been 'Creedal' In Its Nature?



## What Are We Confessing?

Throughout history, Christians have understood the importance of objective truth. Believers have always maintained that 'faith' is hinged upon the act of confessing the truth about God and the truth about Jesus. That's why so much scripture describes the importance of confessing this truth:



### **Romans 10:9-10**

*That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*



### **Hebrews 13:15-16**

*Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.*



### **Hebrews 3:1**

*Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.*

Over and over again, the Bible affirms the existence, the role and the value of objective truth as it calls on believers to openly proclaim that truth to the world around them. Think about that for a minute. When we formulate what we believe to be true and proclaim this to others, what are we really doing? We are developing and confessing CREEDS (statements that summarize what we believe)! From the very beginning (from the earliest days of the apostle's and their writings), Christians have always held the concept of creeds in high regard.



## Believers Have Always Done This

And that really shouldn't surprise us. After all, the Bible is replete with examples of believers who proclaim what they believe to be true. The scriptures are filled with examples of believers who make short, concise statements of belief, and these statements are actually miniature creeds of a sort (they are statements of what is believed to be true). Let's take a look at just a few:



### **1 Kings 18:39**

*And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God."*



### **Matthew 16:16**

*Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*



### **John 1:49**

*Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"*



### **John 6:68-69**

*Simon Peter answered him, "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."*



### **Acts 8:36-37**

*And as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."*

Clearly, Christians have proclaimed their belief over the centuries, and when they did this, they were proclaiming short creeds; short statements of truth.



## **In Order To Preserve the Faith**

The writers of scripture (and the first leaders of the church) valued these statements enough to document them for all time, and they understood their value to the Christian Community. It's important for us to understand the value of proclamations such as these, because they demonstrate that believers have always been concerned about having the correct OBJECT OF FAITH (as described in the Bible). This is really important for us to understand. The writers of scripture believed that it was not only important for believers to have faith, but to place that faith in the God that had been accurately described in the scriptures. The Biblical authors understood that a saving faith must be placed in the God that was specifically and uniquely described in the scriptures.

The Biblical authors were also concerned that their young converts might stray from the truth of God that was described in the scriptures, and as a result, might also walk away from the correct object of their faith. These writers repeatedly warned the faithful not to confuse the truth of the world with the truth of the Christian Worldview:



### **Hebrews 13:9**

*Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings.*

As important as it was for individual believers to understand and hold on to the truth, the Biblical authors were even more concerned that TEACHERS would retain the truth that had been passed on to them. That's why Paul emphatically told church leaders such as Timothy and Titus how important it was to hold on to the objective truth that they were taught:



### **2 Timothy 1:13**

*Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Jesus Christ.*



### **Titus 1:9**

*...hold fast the faithful word which is in accord with the teaching, that he may be able to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.*

Paul makes this request of Timothy and Titus because he knew how important it was for

them to make sure that the truth he taught them was not corrupted over time. But how was this to be accomplished? One good way to maintain the truth was simply to (1) State it as clearly as possible, and then (2) Restate it as often as possible:



### **Proclaiming the Truth in the Bible, As Clearly As Possible**

Maybe that's why we find several proclamations of doctrinal truth in the Bible. Paul, for example, took the time to delineate some of the doctrinal truths of our faith as he wrote to the Corinthian church (who apparently struggled to resist the outside influences of their culture):



#### **1 Corinthians 8:6:**

*...yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.*



#### **1 Corinthians 15:3-6:**

*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.*

Over and over again, the Biblical authors, in an effort to help young believers maintain the truth, did their best to state this truth in the pages of scripture.



### **Restating the Truth in the Bible, As Clearly As Possible**

But as we said, it wasn't enough to simply state the truth. The earliest Christian communities also developed the habit of repeating these truths in the form of recited creeds. It even appears that some of these creeds are recorded in the scriptures themselves. In the following two passages, Paul wrote to Timothy and then to the church in Philippi and recorded two early confessions of faith. These were, in essence, simple creeds that were familiar (or were about to be familiar) to the early readers of scripture and were (or were about to be) practiced in the first century church:



#### **1 Timothy 3:16**

*Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion:*

*He was manifested in the flesh,  
Vindicated in the Spirit,  
Seen by angels,  
Preached among the nations,  
Believed on in the world,  
Taken up in glory.*



#### **Philippians 2:5-11**

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:*

*Who, being in very nature God,  
Did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,*

*But made himself nothing,  
 Taking the very nature of a servant,  
 Being made in human likeness.  
 And being found in appearance as a man,  
 He humbled himself  
 And became obedient to death-  
 Even death on a cross!  
 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
 And gave him the name that is above every name,  
 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
 In heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
 And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
 To the glory of God the Father.*

If you open your own personal Bible and look at these two passages, you will find that the modern translators have formatted the creeds in a manner that isolates them within the larger passage (they are usually indented). This is because they believe these two passages to be the earliest of creeds (statements of belief).

### 1 Timothy 3

<sup>3:1</sup>It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires *to do*. <sup>2</sup>An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, <sup>3</sup>not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money. <sup>4</sup>*He must be* one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity <sup>5</sup>(but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?); <sup>6</sup>*and* not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. <sup>7</sup>And he must have a good reputation with those outside *the church*, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. <sup>8</sup>Deacons likewise *must be* men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, <sup>9</sup>*but* holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. <sup>10</sup>And let these also first be tested, then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. <sup>11</sup>Women *must* likewise *be* dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. <sup>12</sup>Let deacons be husbands of *only* one wife, *and* good managers of *their* children and their own households. <sup>13</sup>For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

<sup>14</sup>I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; <sup>15</sup>but in case I am delayed, *I write* so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. <sup>16</sup>And by common confession great is the mystery of godliness:

He who was revealed in the flesh,  
 Was vindicated in the Spirit,  
 Beheld by angels,  
 Proclaimed among the nations,  
 Believed on in the world,  
 Taken up in glory.

### Philippians 2

<sup>2:1</sup>If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup>then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

<sup>5</sup>Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

<sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature <sup>a</sup> God,  
 did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,  
<sup>7</sup>but made himself nothing,  
 taking the very nature <sup>b</sup> of a servant,  
 being made in human likeness.  
<sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man,  
 he humbled himself  
 and became obedient to death-  
 even death on a cross!  
<sup>9</sup>Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
 and gave him the name that is above every name,  
<sup>10</sup>that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
<sup>11</sup>and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
 to the glory of God the Father.

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed-not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence-continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. <sup>13</sup>For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

<sup>14</sup>Do everything without complaining or arguing, <sup>15</sup>so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe <sup>16</sup>as you hold out <sup>c</sup> the word of life-in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing. <sup>17</sup>But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. <sup>18</sup>So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

Scholars and historians believe that these creeds were either introduced to readers so that they would recite them in the context of their group meetings, or were recorded by Paul because they were already being used! In either case, it is clear that creeds were an early part of the Christian faith and an early part of the practice of the Christian Church.



### **The Apostles Issued Statements of Faith (Creeds)**

That really shouldn't surprise us, because there is historical evidence that early church leaders would occasionally convene in order to determine the Biblical truth related to a particular matter. In essence, there is historical evidence that indicates that the early leaders of the church would come together in the form of a "council". Now, I'm not talking about the history of the Church and the early councils formed under the Roman Empire; I'm talking about the councils that are described in the Bible! One such Council is described in the Book of Acts, Chapter 15. In this passage of scripture, a council of Church leaders is called to settle the debate about whether or not new believers should be circumcised according to the custom of Moses. Paul and Barnabas joined the Apostles in Jerusalem, and with James overseeing the Council, they formulated a creed related to this issue and sent it out to all of Christendom:



#### **Acts 15:23-29**

*And they sent this letter by them,*

*"The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."*

The Bible records the fact that the early leaders of the Church took the time to address a growing error in belief that was developing within Christendom. Pharisaic Christians were attempting to require new believers to be circumcised, and the leaders of the Church now had to clarify the truths of the faith. As a result, a statement of truth was developed that served as a creed describing the ESSENTIAL truths related to this issue. Even WITHIN the apostolic era, and WITHIN the timeframe that is chronicled in the Bible, councils were already a part of the Christian tradition and creeds were an important part of the fabric of our faith.



### **And the Early Church Issued Statements of Faith As Well**

This early creed, as recorded in the Book of Acts, is not the only statement of faith that was developed by early believers. As the Apostolic age came to a close and the words of scripture were recorded for eternity, subsequent believers and church leaders formed their own doctrinal statements in order to clarify and define the truth of the Biblical teaching.

Irenaeus was one such early church leader. He was born in the second century and became a follower of Polycarp (who was himself a disciple of the Apostle John). Irenaeus eventually became the regional church leader of Lugdunum in Gaul (now Lyon, France). His early written work was highly influential to believers at the time, and he was an excellent apologist for the faith. He found himself battling with a number of false teachings within Christendom, and as a result, he developed a statement of faith designed to affirm a number of Christian truths:

***Irenaeus' "Rule of Faith" (Late 2nd Century)***

*"...this faith: in one God, the Father Almighty, who made the heaven and the earth and the seas and all the things that are in them; And in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was made flesh for our salvation; And in the Holy Spirit, who made known through the prophets the plan of salvation, and the coming, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the bodily ascension into heaven of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and his future appearing from heaven in the glory of the Father to sum up all things and to raise anew all flesh of the whole human race..."*

You may have noticed that Irenaeus was starting to describe the Biblical truths related to the virgin birth of Jesus and his death, resurrection and ascension. He also affirmed Jesus' role in the future judgment and resurrection of all mankind.

In a manner similar to Irenaeus, another early church leader named Hippolytus also attempted to affirm several Christian truths in order to make sure that the young believers under his care had a correct understanding of the nature of God. Hippolytus was actually a disciple of Irenaeus and you will hear a distinct similarity between Irenaeus' "Rule of Faith" and Hippolytus' Baptismal instructions. Hippolytus used this instructional statement to prepare his new converts for baptism and to confirm that they had a correct understanding of the Christian Worldview:

***The "Interrogatory" Creed of Hippolytus (approximately 215 AD)***

*Do you believe in God the Father All Governing? Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, Who was begotten by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary, Who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died (and was buried) and rose the third day living from the dead, and ascended into the heavens, and sat down on the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, in the holy Church and in the resurrection of the body?*

Much like Irenaeus, Hippolytus affirmed certain truths as he questioned his candidates for Baptism. Like Irenaeus, he made propositional truth claims about the virgin birth of Jesus, his death, resurrection and ascension, and his future role as the judge of the living and the dead.

Within years of the closing of the Canon of Scripture, early believers and church leaders were quickly developing statements of faith and pressing these statements into practice as they interviewed and initiated new believers. These statements of faith were regional and individual in nature, yet they are strikingly similar. That shouldn't surprise us, because they are derived from the same source material. Each statement is drawn from the words and doctrinal truths that were recorded in the Bible and taught by the Apostles.



## The First Widely Accepted Creed

The Apostles were careful to teach the doctrines that eventually found their way into Irenaeus' "Rule of Faith" and Hippolytus' "Interrogatory Creed". So, even long after the death of the Apostles, as the truths they taught began to appear in creedal form, a statement of faith took on their name and became known as the Apostle's Creed. As you read it, notice the similarities to the two prior statements of faith:

### *The Apostle's Creed*

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen*

This foundational creed, as short and as simple as it is, describes the most basic beliefs of early Christians. While it is far from complete and fails to capture the important details of the nature of Jesus and the Nature of God, it does provide believers with a simple foundation for faith in Jesus. More importantly, this creed is further evidence of the fact that the first believers affirmed the existence of objective truths about the nature and identity of God.



## They Didn't Stop There

Now this effort to articulate objective theological truth was not limited to the earliest believers. In fact, creeds and statements of faith have always been an important part of the tradition and fabric of the Christian Church. Christianity has always been CREEDAL. From the earliest days right up to (and through) the Post-modern age. Christians have tried to understand and articulate the truth of the Christian Worldview, and their efforts have often taken the form of creeds. Here is a list of some of the major efforts that Christians have made in an effort to define what they believe:

*The Apostle's Creed*

*The Nicene Creed (325/381AD)*

*The Definition of Chalcedon (451AD)*

*The Athanasian Creed (5th-6th Century AD)*

*The Creed of Gregory of Neocaesarea (Mid-Third Century AD)*

*The Canons of the Second Council of Orange (529AD)*

*The 95 Theses Posted by Luther (1517AD)*

*The Edict of Worms (1521AD)*

*The Schleithem Confession of Faith (1527AD)*

*The Augsburg Confession (1530AD)*

*The Confession of Trent (1545-1556AD)*

*The Scot's Confession (1560AD)*

*The Belgic Confession (1561AD)*

*The Heidelberg Catechism (1563AD)*

*The Second Helvetic Confession (1566AD)*

*The Thirty-Nine Articles of (Anglican) Religion (1571AD)*  
*The Epitome of the Formula of Concord (1576AD)*  
*The Formula of Concord (1577AD)*  
*The Five Articles of the Remonstrants (1610AD)*  
*The Canons of Dordt (1618-19AD)*  
*The Confession of Cyril Lucaris, Eastern Orthodox (1629AD)*  
*The Dordrecht (Anabaptist) Confession (1632AD)*  
*The Westminster Confession (1646AD)*  
*The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647AD)*  
*The (Eastern Orthodox) Confession of Dositheus (1672AD)*  
*The Orthodox (Ukrainian) Confession of Faith (1662AD)*  
*The (Twenty-five) Articles of (Methodist) Religion (1808AD)*  
*The General Rules of the Methodist Class Meetings (1808/1868AD)*  
*The Eastern Orthodox (Russian) Catechism (1830)*  
*The Thirty-five Articles of (Reformed Episcopal) Religion (1875AD)*  
*The Barmen (German Evangelical) Declaration (1934AD)*  
*The Vatican II Proclamation (1962-1965AD)*  
*The (Evangelical United Brethren Church) Confession of Faith (1963AD)*  
*The (American) Mennonite Confession of Faith (1963AD)*  
*The Lausanne Covenant (1974AD)*  
*The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978AD)*  
*The Manila Manifesto (1989AD)*  
*The (Church of the Nazarene) Manual (1998AD)*  
*The Holiness Manifesto (2006AD)*

Now that's quite a list; two thousand years worth of creeds and statements of faith. If nothing else, this list demonstrates the fact that Christianity has always been CREEDAL in its nature. After all, Christianity is a worldview that makes a number of objective truth claims. When believers make an effort to organize and communicate these truths, they often find themselves forming summaries of minimal essential truths – “creeds”.



### **Moving Away From Classic Orthodox Christianity**

We now live in a culture that is rather suspicious of any claim that objective, absolute truth exists. In what has been described as the “Post Modern” age in which we live, all truth is thought to be personal, subjective and ‘perspectival’ in nature (more on this [HERE](#)). In this environment, ANY ‘creedal’ list of objective and universal truth is going to become unacceptable to the culture at large, and even Christians are beginning to move away from their own tradition as they lose confidence in the objective nature of truth.

But there are many good reasons to believe that Christianity is still ‘creedal’ at its very core (more on that [HERE](#)). In addition, history demonstrates that Christianity has ALWAYS been creedal, from the very days recorded in the scripture to the history of the early church. To move away from a creedal form of the faith is to simply move away from the faith altogether. While some within the Christian community may desire an anti-creedal form of Christianity as they attempt to reconcile the philosophic ideas of the culture with the exclusive truth claims of the faith, to do so is to deny the essence and nature of Christianity itself.